

Moving from Professional Development to Professional Growth



Julia sits down at her kitchen table to review tomorrow's lesson framework and the activities mapped out for her students. She is excited about the new unit on "the changing role of media in shaping public policy" they will be starting. Yet she silently admits to herself being a bit nervous because she is going to try a new teaching strategy with her class. Julia knows she is a good teacher and understands her content well, but this activity will require the application of some classroom management skills her instructional coach only recently covered with her.

She decides to log on to the district's online professional development center to access the streaming video lesson bank. Once inside, she sits back and begins to watch narrated vignettes of a master teacher demon-

strating the particular technique she will use tomorrow. Julia begins to make mental notes and careful observations. Her tension slowly melts into a calm sense of confidence that tomorrow will be a great day of learning in her classroom.

Although this scenario may not be possible in many schools or districts across the country today, the vision behind it is more important than the technology that delivers it. Yet we are quickly moving toward a time when both will become not only realities but necessities to prepare our teachers and administrators to effectively meet the educational challenges and opportunities presented daily.

In this article, I will cover some key changes occurring with regard to professional development and how those are reflected in practice in one district. I will also look at the role that staff technology standards, software standards, and professional development models can play in building an integrated professional growth program.

Changes in Professional Development

Changes in instructional thought and practice are driving the need

for change in professional development as well. Over the past 20 years, the entire concept of preparing our educational staff through formal professional training programs has evolved significantly. The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) recognizes this evolution and has been leading this charge by supporting the establishment of national standards for professional development.

The NSDC states "These standards provide direction for designing a professional development experience that ensures educators acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. Staff development must be results driven, standards based, and job embedded."

In their latest revision of the standards, the NSDC stated three questions that guided the discussion:

1. What are all students expected to know and be able to do?
2. What must teachers know and do to ensure student success?
3. Where must staff development focus to meet both goals?

These are very powerful questions as starting points for building any professional growth program, whether at the national, state, or local level. And building a program is what we chose to do in my district.

As Stephen Covey says, "Begin with the end in mind." So if you are going to redesign your professional development program, you must know what your end result is going to be. These three questions are powerful building blocks in that equation. However, they were not the only pieces.

Technology Is Not a Change Agent

Contrary to many technologists, I subscribe to the notion that technology is not a change agent. To me, technology is merely an *accelerant* for the change that is already occurring

By Don Hall

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within your organization—good or bad. Why would I say that, you ask?

After finishing Jim Collins's book *From Good to Great* in which he studied what allowed 28 high profile companies to be high performing companies for more than 15 years, I found one particularly fascinating tidbit. Technology was not a significant contributing factor to the success or downfall in any one of those companies. However, it did accelerate the decline or rise already occurring within each organization.

As I reflected on that thought and my own experience over my 15 years in public education, I discovered the same thing to be true. Technology helped school districts that had their educational act together achieve their goals more quickly. However, the infusion of technology did not help poor-performing districts suddenly get better all by itself. Without the other support mechanisms—such as an aligned curriculum, appropriate assessment program, ongoing professional development—in place, the technology could not change the decline and usually made the decline more evident.

So the sad truth is that technology is not a change agent, but merely a magnifying glass and accelerator. For districts pinning their hopes on technology turning things around, I know this is not what they wanted to hear, but it is key to understanding why the huge gains we have been waiting for in public education have not been happening. That is also why our school district pushes even harder to make sure technology can be applied to a system aligned properly to take advantage of the accelerant effect.

Aligned for a Purpose

So how do you make major changes in a professional development program that has already been quite successful for a number of years? Not easily...

Our district has been known for being innovative in this area in the past, so when you start talking about restructuring things and rebuilding, it is not an easy discussion, as many people are not even sure why you need to change in the first place. That is the first thing to establish—the *why*.

Going back to the three questions from the NSDC's Web site, we truly believed we were not aligned to successfully address those questions, especially when it came to the application of technology. So we began by identifying three things we had already implemented successfully in our district:

1. Technology standards for students
2. Technology standards for staff
3. Software standards for all desktop purchases.

Then we looked at what relationship these factors had to each other in conjunction with the NSDC standards. The result was the Technology Professional Development matrix below.

As you can see, we tried to graphically outline the various relationships

among the various factors of this model. There are several key assumptions to note.

1. All staff members are expected to achieve the level of proficient. This proficiency will provide them the skills to create instructional experiences to enable students to achieve mastery of their technology standards as well.
2. Our technology plan has an equity component in it that provides a computer for every teacher in the district. On every computer, you will find the minimum productivity tools needed for them to achieve their required proficiency level.
3. The professional development activities and their structure/delivery method are designed to support the developmental stage of the user rather than being a more advanced version of the same class at a lower level.
4. All of these elements are horizontally aligned to support the others so they naturally fit and complement each other. However, they are also built to allow for the natural progression of vertical growth.



So the key was to align our district technology resources (software standards), expectations (staff and student standards), professional development outcomes (continuum), and professional development activities (delivery structure and models). Most districts already have these pieces in place, but they have not put them together to see how they correlate. When you do that, you begin to realize the systemic nature of what you are trying to accomplish and reap the benefits.

What Key Changes Have Happened

Usually people ask me, "Was it worth it?" I can easily say "yes." The changes we have already experienced during the past two years have been significant, and now as we head into our third year, I see maturation in the types of discussions that as educators you hope to observe. So what are some of the other key changes?

First and probably most important is moving from interest-based to diagnostic and prescriptive development. I can't overemphasize the power in this shift. Traditionally, teachers took the workshops they were interested in or thought would be fun to learn. Now they are taking the ones that will help them achieve their learning goals in terms of student growth and achievement as measured by our standards. This has also changed the way the programs look as well. The focus has moved from the introduction and mastery of skills to the emphasis on student learning and results.

We have also linked the technology competencies into their annual district evaluation/assessment instrument. By combining the technology standards with their evaluation plan, you can move the discussion to authentic professional growth. It also eliminates the need for a separate assessment process for technology that can often be diminished or ignored in the midst of numerous other instructional needs. The key is modeling in every aspect

what integration means, even in evaluation and professional development.

Next, I think the movement from *moment in time* to *just in time* models is powerful. It has made the learning more relevant for the staff, and they seem to take hold of the knowledge and make better use of it. In the past, we deluged them in wonderfully scripted, documented, and probably quite entertaining workshops, but seldom did that get translated into classroom practice, because the relevance and immediacy were not present for the teacher.

Now with virtual/online learning options, teacher mentor/coaches, and self-service lessons, teachers can access the information they need—when they need it and are ready to use it. This need, rather than the instructor, drives the relevance and motivation to learn. It also increases the likelihood that the new skill will be implemented in a timely way. Remember, new knowledge is just like fresh fish. It has a very short shelf life.

Finally, I think it is beginning to signal a change that we are truly a learning community. Ironically, public education seems to be more resistant to lifelong learning than many organizations. Most professionals understand the necessity of continually upgrading skills to remain sharp and competitive. However, for far too many, professional development seems to be an interruption to what they think they should be doing or a duty they have to get out of the way. Fortunately, I think that is changing in our district, and I believe district leaders have played a role in that change.

As you will see in the model, the upper two tiers are voluntary. We do not require all staff to achieve those levels—yet. However, we do promote and foster growth opportunities and want to show what lies down the road, because once we have everyone to standard then it will be time to

raise the standard. Why? The world around us will have changed and require more from us. So we need to be ready for it as well. After all, that is what a learning community does.

Conclusion

As you read through this article, you probably thought, "this professional development program really was not all that revolutionary." You are right. It is something you too can do. That is the amazing part. Alignment is not only powerful and practical; it is also doable. Remember, you cannot count on technology to be the change agent to magically make your district perform better or make your test scores soar. Technology will, however, make things happen faster, and one hopes they are the right things. That is really up to you and your colleagues in curriculum, assessment, and staff development. Working together, you can create an articulated learning environment where technology can add great power to accelerate positive change.

So we end where we began, with three simple questions:

1. What are all students expected to know and be able to do?
2. What must teachers know and do to ensure student success?
3. Where must staff development focus to meet both goals?

Build your professional development program around these simple concepts. Then use your technology to accelerate the learning with your resources, standards, and activities aligned and wonderful things can happen for you, too.



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